

London's lost rivers

The buried waterways



Forget the tube, join us on a journey through a subterranean network of rivers and discover a whole new underground system.

Water has shaped London's history and character. Without the mighty Thames flowing through the heart of the capital, London would be an entirely different place and Londoners would be different people. And it's not just the Thames that defines the capital's personality. London is a city of many rivers, seen and unseen, and they've all been crucial to its development.

When the Romans arrived here nearly two thousand years ago, they found a wider and shallower Thames, surrounded by thick, often waterlogged oak forest. They built a settlement on two hills, split by a stream called the Walbrook ('Wall Brook'), so named because it entered the town through the city walls.

By the 1200s much of the forest was cleared to become farmland, which was often marshy as many small streams flowed across it. More recently, in the 1800s and 1900s, most farmland was built on and London's streams began to disappear underground. Today many lost rivers are part of the general drainage system. But their impact is still felt above ground by, for example, giving their names to areas and streets and even, some argue, by creating energy lines that influence our moods and health.

Human behaviour was responsible for the loss of many of London's rivers. The Thames has been treated badly but it's now healthier than ever and supports a wide range of wildlife. The Mayor has talked of reviving some of London's lost rivers and London Wildlife Trust is committed to river conservation and restoration projects across the capital.

The Fleet or Holbourne

Perhaps the most famous of London's lost rivers, the Fleet rises in Hampstead, flowing downhill to Camden, under the Regent's Canal, through King's Cross, before following the course of what is now Farringdon Road to meet the Thames at Blackfriars.

In Roman times, the mouth of the Fleet was an impressive 200 metres wide, but this river was best known for how badly it smelt. It became clogged with general human waste and, passing through Smithfield meat market, it became the butchers' bin for rotting offal. The stinking Fleet had to go and, in the 1700s, it was gradually bricked over. The outlet of the Fleet Sewer can now be seen at Blackfriars Station, but it's only used when there's exceptionally heavy rain.





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The Tyburn or Tybourne

The Tyburn also originates in Hampstead, but it flows south westerly through Swiss Cottage, crossing the Regent's Canal near London Zoo before flowing down Marylebone Lane. It crosses Oxford Street before heading through Piccadilly to join the Thames near Westminster and Vauxhall Bridges, where you can still see the main outlets. Oxford Street used to be known as Tyburn Road and between the 12th and 18th centuries criminals were hanged on the Tyburn Gallows. The river used to provide water to monks living at Westminster Abbey but it became polluted as London expanded and it too was bricked over and diverted into sewers.

The Neckinger and the Effra

The Neckinger rises in Southwark and joins the Thames near the Design Museum. It takes its name from the area where pirates

were hanged with a rope called the 'Devil's Neckinger' or neck cloth. You'll find a Neckinger Street in Bermondsey today. The Effra rises further south in Crystal Palace and flows through Brixton and Kennington before meeting the Thames at Vauxhall Bridge. Queen Elizabeth I apparently travelled by barge down the Effra to visit Walter Raleigh at his home in Brixton.

The Hackney Brook

The Hackney Brook is a lost tributary of the River Lee. It rises in Holloway, flows through Finsbury Park towards Dalston, cutting across the northern edge of Clissold Park, before meeting the Lee in Hackney Wick. By the 1850s, population growth meant the waterway had become an open sewer and so, mirroring the fate of many of London's rivers, it was shut underground.

Recommended reading

Lost Rivers of London by Nicholas Barton

Above: The River Tyburn
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Opposite: The River Fleet
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IS THERE A LOST RIVER UNDER YOUR STREET?

- The Walbrook – from Shoreditch to Southwark Bridge via Liverpool Street
- The Langbourne – from Aldgate to Custom House
- The Fleet or The Holbourne – from Hampstead Heath to Blackfriars via King's Cross
- The Tyburn – from Hampstead Heath to Pimlico via Oxford Street
- The Westbourne – from Hampstead Heath to Chelsea via Bayswater
- Counters Creek – from Kensal Green to Chelsea via Earls Court
- The Hackney Brook – from Holloway to the River Lee via Dalston
- The Moselle – from Hornsey to the River Lee via Tottenham
- The Phillebrook – from Walthamstow to the Lee at Leyton via Wanstead
- The Neckinger – from Camberwell to Deptford via Bermondsey
- The Effra – from Crystal Palace to Vauxhall via Brixton
- The Falcon Brook – from Streatham to Chelsea via Dulwich
- The Battersea Brook – from Clapham to Vauxhall via Battersea
- The Graveny – from Norbury to the Wandle via Streatham
- The Peckham Rye – from Camberwell and Honor Oak to Peckham Rye Common